

Coins may prove authenticity of Shroud of Turin

By Roger Boye

New tests involving an ancient Roman coin suggest that the Shroud of Turin—a cloth many people believe wrapped the body of Jesus—originated in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

For years, scholars have debated the authenticity of the shroud and the outline of a 5-foot-7-inch crucified man appearing on it. Some experts say the "literal, physical resurrection of Jesus" probably created the outline while others insist the shroud is a pious forgery.

The coin-related mystery surfaced in the mid-1970s when three scientists put photographs of the "man of the shroud" in three-dimensional relief, discovering that two buttonlike objects covered the man's eyes. In 1979, a Chicago priest said the object over the right eye is a "lepton" coin showing an astrologer's or shepherd's staff and the letters "UCAI," part of an inscription for "of Tiberius Caesar."

Hobby scholars know that Pontius Pilate, governor of Palestine, issued such coins from about 29 A.D. to 31 A.D. And the custom of placing objects on the eyes of the dead to keep eyelids closed in the grave apparently originated in ancient times.

The Rev. Francis L. Filas of Loyola University, a longtime shroud researcher, made the lepton identification after comparing enlarged photographs of the right eye with an ancient coin he had acquired. The shroud itself, of course, is stored in Turin, Italy, and is only rarely accessible for viewing.

In the most recent study, Dr. Robert M. Haralick of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University subjected shroud photographs to a sophisticated process called digital image analysis. He concluded in a Dec. 1 report that several parts of his "computer pictures" matched the lepton coin design to "some degree," in effect confirming the visual findings made earlier by Father Filas.

Precise identification of the round objects over the eyes is critical to authentication of the shroud itself. For example, if the object over the right eye is a lepton made during the time of Jesus, as the latest study strongly suggests, arguments supporting the shroud are greatly strengthened.

Nevertheless, at least one critic is not impressed, still saying that the shroud as well as the possible coin image, is a skillful hoax.

Incidentally, the Jesuit Community of Loyola supported the latest study financially. Dr. Haralick, director of the Spatial Data Analysis Laboratory at Virginia Polytechnic, volunteered his time in directing the image research.